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Bathroom issues

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BATHROOM ISSUES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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In

The School of Art

By

Craig Clifford

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ABSTRACT

“Obscenity is a human manifestation. The toilet has no central nervous system. No level of consciousness. It is not aware; it is a dumb toilet; it cannot be obscene; it’s impossible.”

Lenny Bruce

How to Talk Dirty and Influence People

Things that make people uncomfortable intrigue me and I find that these same things are very ones that make us laugh the hardest. The fact that sex and bodily functions both make people laugh in addition to making them feel uncomfortable is no accident.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“Obscenity is a human manifestation. The toilet has no central nervous system. No level of consciousness. It is not aware; it is a dumb toilet; it cannot be obscene; it’s impossible.”

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How to Talk Dirty and Influence People

Things that make people uncomfortable intrigue me and I find that these same things are the very ones that make us laugh the hardest. The fact that sex and bodily functions both make people laugh in addition to making them feel is no accident. In this exhibition, I am attempting to combine these two threads in a way that makes the viewer laugh, while at the same time reconsidering the rationale behind this uncomfortability.

My journey to this work began with my own associations with both humor and discomfort concerning bodily functions and dealings with the ‘bathroom’.

The toilet has always played a major role in my life. I am the fourth of six children and while I don’t remember, my mother has told me that I took months longer to be toilet trained and put up a bigger fuss than any of my brothers or sisters. In our household, my parents had their own bathroom that the kids were not allowed to use (except in cases of extreme emergency), leaving one bathroom for the six of us to fight over. There was never a time when our bathroom was unoccupied and didn’t smell from previous use. When I finally did get my turn in the bathroom, someone was always banging on the door. The bathroom is supposed to be a place of privacy, with universal rules that everyone understands without ever having to be told. I remember being upset when my mom gave birth to my younger brother and sister because that would mean two more people clogging up the bathroom. Because I shared a room with my two brothers, once I discovered the wonders of masturbation, the bathroom was the only place with a door that locked and thus suitable for privacy. I spent many late nights hoping everyone was asleep, sitting on the toilet reading *Playboy* and taking care of business. I remember going camping when I was sixteen, and having no urge to use the bathroom for five days. The drive home was a different story. On my eighteenth birthday I was arrested for being drunk in public, but my fear of being in jail had nothing to do with being harassed or raped, but rather from that fact that there was only one toilet in the middle of the cell for the ten of us to share. When I was twenty only my parents and three children were left living in the house. When my grandmother could no longer take care of herself, my parents had her move in with us. She had bathroom problems that I won’t go into, but these problems were the main reason I got my own place to live. These feelings still linger today. When I moved to Louisiana I spent two and a half days on the Greyhound bus. I started altering my diet two weeks prior to my trip so that I wouldn’t have to use the bathroom for the entire time. This plan worked to perfection.

I guess you could say that stories and anecdotes about the bathroom are my own bridge between uncomfortability and humor. In my family humor is held in high regard. As one of six siblings, I have watched my older and younger siblings try and master the Clifford family sense of humor. Stories are always circulated about funny things overheard, witnessed or thought about. To be an official member of the Clifford family, the other members of the family must approve of one's sense of humor. All subjects are traditionally open for jocularly, except for bodily functions. At my house, talking about needing new underwear, getting a haircut, or having toilet troubles are subjects to be avoided, for fear of making my father sick to his stomach. Personally, if I could design my own house, my toilet would be locked in a vault where no one could walk in on me and no sounds or smells could escape. I don't want people to encounter my bodily functions any more that I want to encounter theirs. While I may be an extreme case, I believe that most people feel the same way. When I watch movies, most of the biggest laughs come from bathroom and fart jokes. The fart joke is as old as time, but it always gets the laugh.

I believe that there are two basic ways to deliver humor. One is to throw out every joke that you can think of so that the funny jokes will override the not so funny ones. Information is thrown at the listener so fast, that they don't really think about the percentage of funny to unfunny jokes. The audience only remembers the funny ones. The other way to deliver jokes is in an edited form. This kind of humor relies on a certain kind of surprise and suddenness in addition to the substance of the humor itself. My humor runs much closer to the second mode of delivery. I depend on taboo subjects and the unexpected to get a laugh. Making fun of one's self is important and acts as a way to keep the humor from becoming mean spirited. I rarely plan what I am going to say, but wait for someone else to speak and twist their words around into a sexual context. My visual humor shares the same methods as my verbal humor, but takes more planning and a different thought process. I often take a common or familiar object and recontextualize it as a sex object. This is especially true of functional ceramic forms that the user shares an intimate relationship with. By adding an unexpected, out -of-context element to the piece, I am able to get a laugh and hopefully a second look. I believe humor helps people deal with subjects that they may not feel comfortable discussing in normal circumstances. Humor has given people like Lenny Bruce and Richard Pryor ways to discuss racism and other uncomfortable subjects. When I began this project I never discussed bathroom issues with anyone, in fact they were taboo, but now I feel much more at ease about the subject.

CHAPTER 2. OBJECTS

2.1 The Power of Objects

Objects have a power over us. I choose everyday objects to work with because I want the viewer to have an instant association with what I am making. As an artist I want my work to be universal and to communicate on a large level. Artists often make work for other artists or collectors. In ceramics for example, there is a lot of work made about the process of making, glazing and firing, and while the average person can appreciate the beauty of an object, unless they have experience with the process, much of the work is lost on them. I have seen potters admiring soda fired pieces, discussing the flashing or the way the flame must have hit the piece, but the average person lacks the visual vocabulary and experience of functional studio ceramics to really appreciate the work on the same level as the initiates. There is a larger vocabulary of meaning for the viewer in the use of a recognizable object in the work. For me the transformation of the object is key. How do you give another layer of meaning to an object we know so well?

2.2 The Toilet

When deciding on a subject for my thesis I wanted to use an object that was ceramic, owned by a majority of the population, but was given little or no thought by the owners. The toilet seemed to fit perfectly. In addition to fitting all of my criteria, the toilet serves a specific purpose that makes people uncomfortable to discuss and is only useful in one room.

People think of the toilet only as a place to relieve themselves, yet they read on the toilet, see it as a place to relax, primp or masturbate. The toilet is a place where we are partially nude and vulnerable. We can often use the toilet to judge our overall health: are we regular, constipated or having issues with our stool? I like to imagine supermodels or famous actresses going to the bathroom because the idea makes them human to me, yet at the same time, I have never wanted to know about the bathroom habits of my current or former girlfriends. I just like to pretend that they are the only people in the world who don't use the toilet. Using the toilet is one of the actions that we all have in common, no matter who we are. It is a place of unwritten rules. When the door is closed we wait outside and do not disturb the occupant. In the men's room, men will never urinate next to each other if there is enough space to spread out. In the crowded men's room, men look up at the ceiling, because looking has its own implications. One of the worst things you can do is to bring food into the bathroom, even if you are only going in to check your hair in the mirror.

CHAPTER 3. THE SHOW

3.1 Process

Almost every object in the bathroom has gone through improvements and design updates except for the toilet. The toilet is now made in designer colors, but beyond that it hasn't changed much. When I began this project at the beginning of the school year, I was going to make toilet tank lids and began making molds for lids that would fit a majority of toilets. As I started collecting toilets to display these lids, I found that there is no universal size. Every toilet I got was different in size than the previous one, so I decided to use prefabricated toilets. In this decision I went from being a maker, to someone who puts things together. In my time at LSU my work as gone through major changes. I began making crude, handbuilt, cartoon pieces, but this work left me unsatisfied, because the work was more about process that the piece itself. I then switched to mold making, because the process took my hand out of the work and allowed the piece to speak for itself. I have now found myself somewhere between a maker and assembler.

For this body of work I began with drawings, which I then edited down to seven ideas. Putting together prefabricated pieces worked out well for the most part and after changing surfaces and adding parts I was pretty satisfied with the results. For some of the pieces this process of assemblage didn't work because I needed to create new shapes and was limited in my ability to add many small pieces to others using only glue. I couldn't physically construct the toilet bowls because I wanted to keep the pieces functional, but was able to make the tanks by hand, thus allowing me to add the many pieces and customize the shape of the tank. After looking at all the pieces I had made and talking to the Visiting Artist, Ryan Berg, I made the decision to make a whole toilet piece by hand. Ryan spoke to me about the possibility of taking the work to a greater level of humor by totally altering the toilet. Instead of a plain toilet, customizing allowed me to push the ideas and get a greater return in humor. For example in "California Toilet", the user sits on the fish's mouth leaving the user with the double connotations of defecating into the mouth and being bitten by the fish. This decision to create from scratch was scary because I had not made anything in more than a year, but proved challenging and made me reevaluate my role as a maker/assembler.

As far as presentation was concerned, I knew I didn't want to present the work in traditional pedestal fashion, so I came up with the idea of bathroom tiles. Tiles are a natural setting for the toilet and I wanted each toilet to have tiles specific to its theme so that they contributed to the mood and humor of each piece.

3.2 Readers Digest

“Readers Digest” is a piece that works on the theme of the bathroom as a place for private time. I customized this toilet with leather and bookshelves so that the piece took on the look of recliner used for reading and relaxing. This piece plays on the dual roles that the bathroom takes on as a room of privacy and defecation. I have been in many bathrooms where reading material is provided. By altering the toilet, I altered the idea of the bathroom as a place reserved for going to the bathroom. A person might use the recliner/toilet to read and relax because of its comfort regardless as to whether or not they needed to use the facilities.



3.3 So You Think Your Shit Doesn't Stink

People have always tried to escape or hide the physical flaws and the bodily functions that we all share. Bald men buy toupees or style their hair in ways to hide their baldness. People are always trying any new thing to look younger like having facelifts or dyeing their hair. "So You Think Your Shit Doesn't Stink" is a toilet that has been altered with an elaborate vent system and surrounded by air fresheners in an attempt to get rid of the smell associated with going to the bathroom. Despite these efforts, the toilet itself is worn and in the process of being destroyed. The idea is that no matter how hard we try to deny the physical realities of living, they are always pushing their way back into the forefront.



3.4 Male and Female Fantasy Toilets

Both of these toilets are decorated with things that women might wear, feather boas and satin. The male toilet is covered with gold leaf breasts and red feather boas. The tiles surrounding it are of cast breasts with bright red nipples. The mouth of the toilet could be taken as the orifice. This decoration symbolizes the male fantasy of naked women and sex.

The female toilet is covered in red velvet flocking and the toilet seat and lid are covered in ceramic candies and penises. The toilet is surrounded by tiles covered in pink and red satin pillows trimmed with lace and accented with a piece of ceramic chocolate and penises. The fabrics, surfaces and colors suggest women's lingerie and bedrooms. Candies are the implied romantic gift and the penises symbolize female desire. This is my attempt as a man to visualize the female fantasy as I created the male fantasy toilet.

The same organs we use for sex are the same as the ones for going to the bathroom. The orifices play dual roles in our lives. We are supposed to wash our hands after relieving ourselves and touching these organs, yet we engage in oral sex where these organs are desirable in a whole other way.



3.5 Farm Feast Fertilize

In “Farm, Feast, Fertilize” I made the tank and the lid by hand so that I could easily create a series of planters for growing vegetables and herbs. The entire toilet was then spray painted green and mounted a bed of astro turf, surrounded by a picket fence. The idea behind this piece is to get the viewer thinking about the relationships between the growing of food, eating it and expelling the waste into the toilet. Waste can double as a source of nourishment or fertilizer in the farming process as it finishes the complete cycle of “Farm, Feast, Fertilize”.

Most people are hesitant to take food into the bathroom, but in this piece, they are confronted with their food being literally grown in the toilet. I tried to make the environment pretty by adorning it with colorful ceramic vegetables, birds and butterflies. I planted herbs to make it smell nice to combat the initial reaction of disgust often seen when confronted with a toilet and food.



3.6 Redwood

In “Redwood”, I have transformed a urinal by covering it in clay made to look like wood. A tree is usually the place where men urinate when outside. This seems like an act of marking territory just like other animals. I have transformed the object of the urinal into one that essentially serves the same purpose: the tree.



3.7 California Toilet

“California Toilet” is shaped like a fish, with the mouth being the mouth of the toilet bowl. Inside the tank swim aquarium fish that the viewer can see through a plate of Plexiglas inserted into the cut out front of the tank. This toilet sits in a bed of sand and is surrounded by seashells. When it rains in California the sewage systems become overworked and untreated sewage flows into the ocean, closing down the beaches. This piece is about how we effect the environment, and the interdependency and delicate balance we have with our natural world. When we flush the toilet, the waste doesn’t simply go away, it just becomes a different sort of problem.



CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

As a maker who transforms objects into art, I have been able to give myself the opportunity of being seen in a different light. I have had many different jobs in my life and though I wouldn't call any of them careers, I was good at most of them and even enjoyed a few. Making art gives me a greater purpose in life than those other jobs. It allows me to have a clear pathway that is both meandering and full of possibilities that are somehow full of purpose. It has led me to be the first person in my family to finish college and receive a master's degree. As an artist, I have been able to transform myself and move through a world where I feel that I don't necessarily fit.

The subjects that interest me are those that hit me close to home. My work always involves humor and this is played out in often silly and obvious ways. I also like to explore the uncomfortable terrain of the hang-ups about sex and bodily functions.

REFERENCES

Bruce, Lenny. *How to Talk Dirty and Influence People*. New York, Fireside, Simon & Schuster Inc., 1992

VITA

Craig Clifford was born in Southern California in 1969. He began working in ceramics in high school and continued with his artwork in community college. In 1998 Craig entered the art program at California State University at Long Beach and received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 2000. Craig began his graduate studies in 2000 and during this time his work changed from handmade, figurative sculpture to assembled and cast sculptural pieces. He received the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the summer of 2003.